

In the devil's snare book report

Literature



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Elliot, J. H. , *Imperial Spain: 1469-1716*. London: Penguin Books, 1963.

423pgs. In *Imperial Spain*, J. H. Elliot examines the history of early modern Spain from the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, to the reformation of the Spanish government by the first member of the Bourbon dynasty. According to the author, at the start of the 15th century, Spain was internally weak, hopelessly divided and isolated from the continent by the Pyrenees.

Yet, by 1492, Spanish society experienced a tremendous transformation which allowed Isabella and Ferdinand to unify the country, secure the largest transoceanic empire the world has ever known, and for a few decades become the strongest nation in all of Europe. Unfortunately, Elliot asserts, whatever dynamism animated this miraculous ascendancy did not last very long and Spain became once again a second or third-rate nation.

The personal rule of the Catholic Monarchs, Elliot argues, is what made Spain a dominant world power; when the Habsburg dynasty ascended to the throne, their cosmopolitan imperialism led them to neglect the nation that Isabella and Ferdinand had begun to create and led to the decline of Spanish power at home and abroad. The book presents the information chronologically and topically. The first four chapters deal with the geographical, social and political changes that took place during the reign of Isabella and Ferdinand. Chapters five through ten analyze the Habsburg dynasty's role in the undermining of the Spanish Empire.

The extensive bibliography includes a topical section and several bibliographical essays. Six maps and five tables round out the work. In Chapter One entitled "The Union of Crowns" Elliot contends that the

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marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon on 19 October 1469 made the idea of Spain an established fact. Even though there were still large sections of present-day Spain outside of the monarchs' control, the union of Castile and Aragon created a situation in which the total unification of the peninsula could not be far off.

While the marriage did not technically consolidate Aragon and Castile into one political entity, the author continues, the close relationship between Isabella and Ferdinand assured that they would act in concert for the betterment of their peoples. It was in this context, Elliot goes on to say in Chapter Two titled "Reconquest and Conquest," that the Catholic Monarchs undertook the first step towards empire: the ReconquistaC the final elimination of the Moorish kingdom of Granada.

Once the Reconquista was accomplished, the author avers, the monarchs could turn their attention to other matters. These included the consolidation of monarchical power in Castile, the financing of the Columbus expedition, the establishment of the New World empire when the expedition proved successful, and the hammering out of a favorable understanding with the Catholic Church. In Chapter Three, "The Ordering of Spain" Elliot continues by stating that Castile was to be the base for the Spanish empire.

Not only was Castile the larger and more populous of the two kingdoms, its political situation allowed for a consolidation of monarchical power that was not possible in Aragon. The Cortes (parliaments) and medieval fueros (far reaching privileges) of the towns and other organizations of Castile were not as strong or as well established as in Aragon and could be more easily circumvented or ignored. With the reorganization of the Council of Castile in

1480, the author asserts, Isabella had gathered not only the executive but the judicial power of the kingdom into her hands.

Once the Reconquista was finalized in 1492, Granada and its resources fell under the jurisdiction of Castile. In addition, Isabella and Castile, Elliot explains, solely financed the Columbus expedition and when the Grand Admiral proved successful, the new territories were administered by the Council of Castile. This meant that the fabulous wealth of the Indies was to further solidify the monarch's position in Castile. Aragon, the author states, was mostly left out of the affairs of empire and it turned its attention to its Mediterranean possessions.

While it is true that Ferdinand interfered little with Isabella's handling of Castilian affairs, Elliot asserts in Chapter Four ("The Imperial Destiny") that certain key issues were handled jointly by the monarchs. This was evident in the concessions that they were able to extract from the Vatican. Patronato Real, or the right of presentation to all ecclesiastical benefices in the Kingdom of Granada was granted to the sovereigns of Spain by Pope Innocent VIII while the Reconquista was still ongoing. Eventually, the author goes on to say, this right would be extended to all Spanish domains. This gave the rulers of Spain almost complete control of the Catholic Church in their territories and in time, the clergy would become the most efficient of bureaucrats and administrators of the Spanish empire. Chapter Five is entitled "The Government and the Economy of the Reign of Charles V" and in it Elliot argues that after Ferdinand's death in 1516, his successor Charles I of Spain, V of the Holy Roman Empire, inherited a thriving, pacified, quasi-united kingdom that had access to the incredible wealth of the Americas.

The problem, the author suggests, was that Charles and his successors did not fully understand the complexity of the Spanish system they inherited.

Instead of cultivating the emerging nationalism of the Spanish, the Habsburgs pursued an imperial policy that ultimately destroyed the empire. Charles' most grievous mistake, according to Elliot, was his absenteeism. Charles was king of Spain for nearly forty years, but he barely spent sixteen in the peninsula. Ferdinand and Isabella, the author postulates, had been personal monarchs always before their people. Charles' absences made this impossible; the people were unhappy with this situation and Charles never became truly Spanish.

Chapter Six, "Race and Religion" describes how Charles' continent-wide affairs generated a sense of instability and neglect in Spain. These continental affairs, the author adds, demanded readjustments, fiscal, social and administrative within Spain. What were her obligations to other parts of the Empire? Charles I, Elliot says, was forever embroiled in some conflict: the struggle with France in the 1520s, the offensive and defensive operations against the Turks in the 1530s, 1540s and 1550s, and the impossible task of destroying heresy once the Counterreformation was launched. That strained the Imperial purse.

Spain was induced to contribute heavily, the author states, though bankruptcy never materialized during Charles' reign. Chapter Seven ("One Monarch, One Empire, and One Sword") and Chapter Eight ("Splendour and Misery") deal with the reign of Phillip II. Not being able to crush the Lutheran heresy, Charles abdicated in favor of his son Philip II in 1566. Philip, who inherited only Spain and the Netherlands, was able to remain in the

peninsula, but the author argues, he chose to pursue a disastrous imperial policy like his father. Philip turned his attention away from building a strong Spanish nation and in his capacity as defender of the

Catholic faith he insisted in conducting a series of ruinous campaigns against the infidels and the heretics, the Ottoman Turks and the English. By 1575, the author continues, the treasury was so empty that Philip was obliged to declare a moratorium on loan payments. Then, the costly Spanish Armada, probably Philip's most important contribution to Habsburg Spain, was permanently crippled in 1588. Elliot maintains that even though materially the defeat of the Armada was not so exorbitant that it could not be made up, the psychological impact was nevertheless great.

It showed, the author argues, the collapse of Spanish policy in northern Europe. In 1598, the year of Philip's death, Elliot asserts, the treasury was depleted and the nation was exhausted. The final two chapters ("Revival and Disaster" and "Epitaph on Empire") discuss the three remaining Habsburg kings, Philip III (1598-1621), Philip IV (1621-1665), and Charles II (1665-1700) and how they were forced to face the reality of the defeat of Spain. According to Elliot, the last three Habsburg kings lacked the material resources, had no capable ministers, viceroys and other officials.

This situation, the author speculates, was due in part to the "closed" nature of the Spanish social and educational systems of the 17th century both of which failed to produce innovative political leaders. Charles II failed to produce an heir and through international machinations, Philip Duke of Anjou was proclaimed King Philip V in April 1701. Once the War of Spanish Succession was concluded and the Bourbon right to the throne formalized by

the Treaty of Utrecht, the new king quickly divested himself of the Netherlands, the Spanish Italian possessions, introduced the intendant system and in 1716 broke Aragon's independence.

Spain was finally centralized and Castilianized, but according to Elliot, it came too late. Castilian economic and cultural hegemony were a thing of the past and its backwardness was thrust upon the more advanced peripheral areas. Elliot's book explains Spanish political and military affairs between 1469 and 1716 in great detail. It is not necessary to be an expert on Spanish history to fully understand the inner workings of the Spanish monarchy as it struggled to centralize the nation and defend Catholicism during the Reformation after reading this book. This book is also useful for those who want to better understand the imperial government of the Spanish colonies. The information presented in this book provides a chronological basis for creating a historical fictional character between 1600 and 1640—especially if the character is involved in politics. The book would not be suitable for those interested in the cultural, intellectual or social history of Spain during this period.